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THE PADRE'S LITTLE CARETAKER

(Second Edition)

A Romance of the Carmel Mission

BY
SARAH RITCHIE HEATH

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SARAH RITCHIE HEATH

TO
MY SISTERS

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THE PADRE'S LITTLE CARETAKER

Her name was Carmelita, as had been her mother's and grandmother's before her. It could hardly have been otherwise, for, like them, she had first seen the light of day in the little cottage under the pear trees which Padre Junipero Serra, of blessed memory, had planted with his own hand, at Carmel—his favorite mission. For generations her mother's family had handed down from daughter to daughter the office of caretaker of the church and its holy relics. And Carmelita had always known that one day her turn would come. She would marry, of course, when old enough; but marriage had never interfered with this sacred office—nor with much else in the Carmel valley. Pedro, Carmelita's father, had herded cattle in the adjacent meadows, and fished in the bay of Carmelo. But one day—

when Carmelita was but seven—he was drowned. After that the small stipend of the caretaker—half of each dime charged for admission—became the sole support of the widow and child, and visitors were scarce, except on those occasions when the guest at del Monte made the pilgrimage.

Carmelita had been cradled in the sunshine, near the stairway leading to the belfry. As soon as she could toddle she had gravely pattered after the strangers whom her mother preceded up the stair and through the church; thus early fitting herself for the duties which were soon to devolve upon her. She was a shy, silent child, but in many respects precocious; blessed with a retentive memory, riotous imagination and keen powers of observation.

One day, when sightseers were few, Carmelita suggested a game.

“Let’s play,” she said to her mother, “that I am the caretaker and you the visitor. You must ask me all sorts of silly questions, and I’ll

show you the church and the relics."

She played her part so well that on the following day her mother entrusted her with the keys. For a time the woman and child shared the office, but the child brought more dimes to the family exchequer than did the woman, and gradually the full responsibility fell on the little girl's shoulders—no heavy burden, however, even for a child of ten.

When the little caretaker was not on duty, she sought playmates among the swallows, who built their nests in the eaves of the church, and among the squirrels and lizards, which, like herself, played hide-and-seek with the shadows, lurking in the ruins of the old adobes. And, like them, she lived in blissful ignorance of the world, the flesh and the devil—until, one day, she ate of the tree of knowledge.

She received the fatal apple at the hand of a stranger—as beautiful as the angel Gabriel. When she had eaten, she looked back upon her childhood as a thing of the past—although

she had counted less than fifteen summers.

She was leaning against a fragment of adobe—a blackened ruin of the dwellings of the padres—when Bedford first saw her.

She did not observe his approach, for her eyes were steadily fixed on Point Lobos, on the further side of Carmelo Bay. She was idly dreaming—of what she could not have told. But Bedford was a poet, and as he curiously studied the unconscious face of the dreamer, he knew, by the divine instinct within himself, that she too saw the wonderful scheme of color in the blue of the Monterey sky, the deeper blue of its mountains, and the yet deeper blue of its waters. He knew that she was listening to a song in the humming of the bees; in the murmuring of the waves on the white sands—a song of love, perhaps, for some country swain who could see in a yellow primrose, “a yellow primrose . . . nothing more.”

“After all,” he reflected, “I believe she is but a child. But when she is

old enough, I suppose she'll marry a lazy Mexican, or"—he studied the girl more narrowly—"an Indian."

The small, willowy figure and olive skin might have been heritages from either Mexican or Indian. The color of her far-seeing eyes was hidden by heavy lashes; but the hair, which fell unfettered by pin or ribbon, like a straight, black mantle to the hem of her frock, inclined him to the belief that she was an Indian.

As a natural sequence to this thought, his mind reverted to the ruins around him. He tried to picture to himself the church as it was more than a century ago, thronged by Indians attracted thither by the lights on the altar, the perfume of burning incense, the sweet-toned bells, the chanted *Te Deum*, and, perhaps above all, by the rich vestments of the padres. But, standing outside the closed door, he found this sudden transition from the nineteenth century too severe a strain upon his imagination.

Hat in hand, he approached Carmelita. The sunlight turned his hair

into rings of bronze, and touched hers with a purple light, like the bloom on the grape. Their eyes met; his as blue as the wide, cloudless sky—hers as black as the night which must inevitably follow day.

For a moment he stood bare-headed before her, as if in the presence of a princess. It was a moment too long. He had crept into her dream of rapture, and the vague essence shaped itself.

Bedford signified his wish to enter the church. Carmelita, still more than half in the clouds, mechanically turned the key in the lock and preceded him through the low broad doorway. He registered. She then led him to the baptistry, where she exhibited in a perfunctory way a comparatively modern baptismal font, carved out of white onyx. He was disappointed.

"This is not the original font," he said; "that was carved out of a solid piece of sandstone. What's become of it?"

Carmelita shook her head.

"I don't know," she answered. "Nobody ever asked me that before. Maybe they've taken it to San Carlos, in Monterey—where they've taken nearly everything."

Her momentary self-consciousness had passed; her tongue was loosened. This was the one real grievance in her placid life. In some respects human nature is the same the world over, and craves sympathy as the only balm for a real or fancied injury. This, Bedford gave in full measure.

In her mother's eyes the case had its sordid aspect, for at San Carlos the entrance fee was a quarter of a dollar, and only a dime at Carmel. This did not trouble Carmelita, who had little use for money. But her spirit rose in indignation against what she regarded as injustice. Veneration for the priests who had authorized this transfer of the church's properties prevented her from designating it by such an ugly word as theft, but her soul was in revolt.

"Down there," she said, pointing in the direction of Monterey, "they

keep the beautiful vestments which the blessed padre, Junípero Serra, wore. They are made of cloth of gold—finer than kings wear—and some of them are embroidered with roses and lilies and real pearls. One of the chasubles has amethysts and topazes sewed on it.”

“How do you know all this, little one?” asked Bedford.

“Anybody can see them who pays two bits,” answered Carmelita. “But sometimes they let the Bishop, or visiting priests, wear them—because, you know, the church isn’t rich enough to buy others.”

“What vandalism!” muttered Bedford.

As one by one Carmelita recalled the holy relics, stored in locked presses down at San Carlos, she waxed eloquent. She touched with less ardor upon the silver candlesticks and censer, the holy-water sprinkler and other furniture of the sanctuary. But the robes in which Padre Serra had officiated at the altar seemed to his little caretaker a

part of his holy person. It may be that underlying her veneration for the padre was a love of finery—an undeveloped instinct of her womanhood, awakened by the richness and beauty of the vestments.

Bedford had seen all of these things, but the girl's enthusiasm interested him, and he led her on to describe each in detail; fanning her indignation till it culminated in an outburst of wrath that they should have robbed Padre Junípero of the very stole in which they had found him—more than a hundred years after he had been buried.

"But," he protested, as he might have teased an excited child, "for Carmel to be jealous of San Carlos is for a daughter to be jealous of her mother. Of course you know that the little church in Monterey is the mother church and 'Carmel' was originally called 'San Carlos del Rio Carmelo.' "

But Carmelita's jealous prejudice was the growth of a lifetime, and was not to be uprooted by a half-hearted

protest. Her attitude suggested to Bedford a thought—an inspiration.

Junípero Serra was manifestly the idol and hero of this imaginative, impressionable child. Through her he would create an interest in the California missions which were rapidly passing out of the world of romance into sober history. Her lips should publish advance sheets of his "Story of the Padres"—yet in embryo. With his finger on her keen sensibilities, he would find the pulse of the people.

Bedford was a rapid thinker. In a moment he had evolved a plan. Meantime, he had lost nothing of Carmelita's plaintive cry against injustice. Advancing to the "sanctuary on the Gospel side, fronting the altar of our Lady of Seven Dolors," he pointed downward where, under the floor, lay the blessed remains of the Fray Presidente and his coadjutors, Padres Crespi, Lopez and Lasuen.

"What does it matter," he soothingly said, "what becomes of the

clothes, when they have left you his body?"

Carmelita looked at him in amazement. She was undergoing a new experience, a reversal of the usual order.

"Were you ever here before?" she asked.

"No," he answered.

"Then how did you know where he was buried?"

Bedford smiled.

"I know a good many things, and if you will let me, I'm going to teach you some of them. But first tell me your name."

"Carmelita." She said.

"Well, Carmelita—" his voice lingered on the syllables as he deliberated. He then repeated it. "Well, Carmelita, if you'll help me, we'll give back to Padre Junípero all that belongs to him." He pointed to the alms box—a mute appeal to strangers to save the dear old church from irretrievable ruin. "We'll fill that box with gold—you and I—and we'll make Carmel so beautiful that the

priests will remember—what they appear to have forgotten—that Carmel, and not San Carlos, was the holy Junípero's best beloved church. And strangers from all over the world shall come to see it, and you—its little caretaker—shall become famous throughout all the missions."

Carmelita's eyes shone like stars as she listened to Bedford's glowing prophecies. In a voice subdued by awe to a half whisper she asked:

"Are you a king?"

"No, child; they don't have kings in this country; at least not the kind that you mean. But come now and show me over the church. What are all these hideous benches in the nave?"

"For the Sunday-school," she replied. "About two dozen children come every Sunday from Carmel City." She pointed toward the little fishing settlement on the beach. "But I hate Sunday-school! Do you think that's a sin?"

"No," answered Bedford, "I don't

think it's a sin. What does your priest say about it?"

"We haven't any parish priest. Once a year—on the feast of San Carlos—a priest comes from Monterey to hold service and confess us. On other feast days we go to Monterey."

He looked at the innocent young face before him and wondered with what possible sin she could charge herself. Presently he asked her. The question obviously embarrassed her, but she evasively answered:

"All sorts of little things."

"And what big thing, Carmelita?"

She wistfully sought his eye, and then confessed to this friend of an hour the sin which she had concealed from the priests. Not that she had dreaded penance, but she loved the sin.

"I sometimes play church."

She said this with the faltering voice of one confessing a crime. Her confessor could scarcely suppress a smile, but he gravely answered:

"I'm sure there's nothing sinful in that."

"But I make believe that the church is full of Indians, and that I am the dear padre. And I read the prayers out of his book, just as he did."

"Can you read Latin?" asked Bedford, in surprise.

"No, not really; but it sounds just like what the priests read."

"Read some for me, that I may hear how it sounds, because"—Bedford's conscience felt no qualm—"if you haven't really said the words, of course you haven't committed any sin."

Carmelita advanced to the chancel rail, knelt for a moment, and crossed herself—her lips moving in silent prayer, which was not "make believe." Then, fitting a key to a padlock, she opened a gate which she closed behind her. Again, before the altar, she prostrated herself in silent prayer. When, for the second time, she rose from her knees, she reverently took in her hand the exquisitely illuminated missal which bore un-

doubted marks of authenticity, as Bedford's practiced eye could discern even at that distance. He could not but commend the church's sagacity in placing its treasures under lock and key at San Carlos, when he saw this priceless treasure entrusted to a child in a roofless ruin.

Carmelita placed her finger on the faded green ribbon which extended beyond the margin, casually explaining that each season in the Christian year had its own color. Then, with rare imitative skill that might have deceived any but a classical scholar, she intoned after the fashion of the priests, substituting meaningless words and phrases for the written prayers.

Bedford, assuring her that the words meant nothing, absolved her. But in his heart he believed that those prayers had ascended straight from her pure young soul to the throne of grace.

He pointed to a well preserved inscription on the wall, in the Chapel of the Crucifixion.

"What does that say, Carmelita?"

This time she did not confess her ignorance, but, as if reading, she slowly repeated in liquid Spanish the words that she had learned by rote:

“O Heart of Jesus, Thou that art always glowing and radiant, inspire and enlighten my heart with Thy divine love.”

“Angels and saints, let us praise the Heart of Jesus.”

Thus he led her on to tell him, in her simple fashion, much that he already knew; giving her in exchange casual glimpses of a world of which she knew almost nothing—the world whence had come the padres.

Progress through the church was slow; for out of the grim, weather-beaten walls Bedford was carving a romance, and as he passed from chancel to belfry, every stone had something to say to him.

Before leaving the church he showed Carmelita a shining gold coin.

“This is a luck-piece,” he said, dropping it into the mite box. “Will

you help me to fill that box with gold?"

She had never owned a gold piece in her life—had rarely handled one—and the sight of his money made her feel more helpless than if he had asked her to carry the brick and mortar wherewith to rebuild the church.

"How can I help you?" she asked, dejectedly.

"Leave that to me, child," he answered. "But you must let me come here often—every day, if I choose—that I may teach you to help me."

Of course he might come every day, she assured him. The church was open to everyone; and surely he—who had paid the entrance fee many, many times over—might come as often and stay as long as he pleased. Every trace of dejection had passed.

"I'm going to give you your first lesson now, Carmelita."

Bedford drew from his pocket-book a fine photograph of Junípero Serra. It was a beautiful, inspiring face;

spiritual, tender, strong of purpose, radiant with hope, but sad withal.

As he minutely examined it he marveled not at the adoration of Catholic California for this man—the dauntless pioneer, the gentle leader, the zealous, untiring priest. He wondered only that the State at large did not open its coffers to canonize appropriately the memory of the sainted padre, and proclaim him throughout the world the hero that he was. His purpose strengthened with these reflections.

He handed the picture to Carmelita.

“Would you like to have this?” he asked.

The girl’s delight had in it a certain pathos. It was manifest that she had not been the recipient of many gifts.

“For me?” she incredulously exclaimed. “For me—to keep for my own! The dear padre!”

“Yes, for your very own,” answered Bedford. “This is your lesson book. I want you to study that

face every day, until you know every line in it; until you can shut your eyes and see the padre standing at that altar, even as the Indians used to see him. I'm going to make you work hard—harder than you ever did in your life. But it won't seem so hard when you remember that you are Junípero's little caretaker, and that you are working for the dear padre's sake—you and I together."

The glad light in the black eyes, which again met the blue, was not all for the dear padre's sake. A new world had suddenly disclosed itself to Carmelita.

Shortly after this episode, a young girl, with unbound hair of dense blackness, touched here and there with a purple light, stood in the nave of the church, amid men and women whose rich apparel was in striking contrast to her simple, almost rude, garb.

At the top of a dark, narrow stairway, winding up through a small tower, a workman was softly chipping fragments of adobe from a

crumbling arch which once must have led into the choir, of which not a vestige remained. To those who had not observed the man, the light "*tap-tap*" of his hammer suggested only that a woodpecker was helping time in its work of demolition.

Under the guidance of the little caretaker, the visitors had made the conventional tour of inspection and now stood near the hidden tomb of the church's founder; the men bare-headed, the women reverently silent.

A voice broke the stillness: the gentle, melodious voice of the padre's caretaker.

"Shall I tell you about Fray Junípero Serra?" she asked in persuasive tones. "How he came to be the Presidente of all the Missions?"

Then, as if inspired, she told the oft-told tale as it had never been told before. She carried her hearers with her in rapid flight from the old world to the new, from the land of the Aztecs to the Californias. She sketched the life of Serra from the cradle to the grave, depicting the last

scenes with thrilling pathos. There was a poetic sentiment, a graceful imagery, a literary touch in her simple, direct language that electrified her audience. The purity of her English was in itself amazing; it was so strangely at variance with her colloquial speech.

When she had brought her audience back to the nineteenth century, to Father Casanova's recent discovery of the long-lost graves, she referred to his noble appeal for the restoration of the church; then paused. The well-bred assemblage knew better than to break silence in the midst of a theme. On the contrary, they waited expectantly; even resisting an impulse to exchange glances, lest this prodigy should miraculously disappear. But the silence frightened her. She became self-conscious, then terrified. She turned to flee.

"Tap-tap," softly sounded in the archway.

The absorbed spectators did not heed the slight noise any more than

they had the cessation of it. But the central figure of the group raised her eyes, and arrested her flight.

Once more the sweet, persuasive voice rang through the church—this time in pleading accents. When she again paused, the work of restoration had begun; a shower of silver and gold fell into the mite box. With the jingle of coin, the spellbound men and women found their tongues. Exclamations of wonder and praise burst from their lips, and they plied the girl with questions.

Whence had come her knowledge, her skill? But these queries elicited no response. Cinderella, shorn of her splendor, crouching over the ashes, was not more humble than was the little orator, descended from the rostrum. Again she had become shy little Carmelita—nothing more.

“Who told you this tale, child?” asked one, more persistent than the rest.

“*Tap—tap*,” softly resounded from the archway.

“I was born here,” answered Car-

melita. And no persuasion could induce further explanation.

The strangers took leave of her at the church door.

"We'll come again," they said, "and bring others with us. Padre Junípero's tomb shall be the best preserved of all the missions—thanks to his little caretaker."

Bedford, yet in his workman's blouse, sought Carmelita in the shadows of the adobes. He found her as he had first seen her, leaning against the broken wall; but this time he did not steal upon her unawares. She was eagerly awaiting him, as she had awaited him many times in the interval, but flushed and tremulous under the excitement of success.

"Bravo, Carmelita," he exclaimed. "Bravo, my girl!"

And then, because they were young and human, they forgot, for a moment, the sainted padre—who had been dead for more than a century.

The visitors kept their word. Again, and yet again, they came and brought others with them: all leav-

ing in the mite box substantial token. The first day was but a prelude to many that followed.

Carmelita's fame spread far and wide. Every attempt, however, to solve her mysterious personality failed. She was distinctly two individuals, and neither was communicative.

She excited expectation and stimulated curiosity by the desultory character of her recital, where her itinerant audience would have lost interest in a sustained story. One day, a dramatic incident was presented; another, a romantic legend told. It was a chime of mission bells—not yet strung together.

Bedford's scheme had developed beyond his most sanguine expectations. Early Western history became the fashion of the hour, and the restoration was so vigorously prosecuted that he feared lest he might have to plead for the ruins.

He had indeed found the pulse of the people. But, in putting his finger on Carmelita's "keen sensibilities,"

he had set her heart strings to vibrating. He tried to persuade himself that he had done her no harm; for he had uniformly and consistently treated her as a child, although he had long since ceased to regard her as such. Then, too, he had ever—save once, perhaps—kept the image of the padre between her and him. Nevertheless, his heart was troubled. When he had gone—and the hour of their inevitable parting was near at hand—would she find compensation in her noble ideals? The church which she so dearly loved had brought peace to many a stricken soul, but would it restore peace to her heart? He feared not.

Bedford was not a vain man, but Carmelita had innocently manifested that which a more worldly-wise woman would have been at pains to have concealed. She had been as wax in his hands, and he had probed her innermost thoughts in molding her to his purpose. Of that purpose he had told her nothing.

“Time enough to explain the ulti-

mate object, when the work is done," he reflected.

But when the new roof had shut out the stars, he knew that explanation could no longer be deferred. Her work was nearly finished; his just begun. She had stirred sleeping Monterey; he must arouse the West, the East—the world. Already he had lingered too long; even now his book should be in the press.

He very awkwardly broke the tidings, and, for the first time, found her obtuse.

"But if the church is finished, why need you do any more work?" she asked. "And why need you go away at all?"

Again he tried to explain:

"The Carmel Mission is but one of many—all going to ruin, unless some step be taken to preserve them."

She looked puzzled.

"When you come back from San Francisco"—that he was going further did not occur to her, and he had not the heart to undeceive her—

"are we going about from Mission to Mission, like play-actors?"

"Heaven forbid!" he involuntarily exclaimed.

For a moment, Bedford was staggered by her suggestion. Was she, after all, the unsophisticated child that he believed her to be, or a woman grown bold for love of him? But with silent protest he disavowed the ugly thought. No, a thousand times no!

"No, Carmelita," he quietly answered, "you couldn't tell this story anywhere but right here; because you couldn't feel it anywhere else as you do here. Your love for the church, which the padre so dearly loved that he chose it for his tomb, is the secret of your success. Any other Mission would be to you but a pile of stones, and your voice would grow cold when you tried to tell the people about it, and then you couldn't make them listen. So I must tell it to these other people in another way."

At these words a demon of jealousy broke loose.

"It's my story," she passionately exclaimed, "it's my story! I shan't let any other caretaker tell my story."

A chill of foreboding seized Bedford. Had he jeopardized his tale by publishing advance sheets? He did not apprehend that Carmelita would resent his publication of the story which she had made her own, but how would the public receive the twice-told tale? True, del Monte was but an atom in a hidden corner of the universe, but—himself a traveler—he knew that the birds of passage who alighted there, even for a day, carried seed to the ends of the earth. Had his work already gone abroad as her story? Had his carefully guarded incognito laid him open to the charge of plagiarism? And, where he already owed reparation, could he claim his own without acting ungenerously?

By way of answer to these self-searching queries, a magnanimous thought obtruded itself. He called it quixotic, and tried thus to put it away



from him. But it was not so easily got rid of, so he squarely faced it.

"Never fear, my little maid," he said, "no one shall rob you of your story. I can't prevent others from telling it; but I can at least promise you that wherever it shall be told, Carmelita's name shall be heard also. But don't fret about any other caretaker; for in all the world there is not one but you that could tell it. Now I want you to make me a promise."

Her smile assented more surely than words.

"No one knows that I've been here," he said. "No one knows who taught you your story; that is our secret—yours and mine. Promise me that you will keep it—until my return."

She promised—and he left her with a kiss on her lips, the first kiss and the last.

A chime of mission bells pealed through the air, awakening the slumbering echoes of the angelus which in the olden days had called the peo-

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